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# A Crown for Rákosi: The Vogeler Case, the Holy Crown of St Stephen, and the (Inter)national Legitimacy of the Hungarian Communist Regime, 1945–1978

MARTIN MEVIUS

ON 6 January 1978 an American delegation led by United States Secretary of State Cyrus Vance handed over to the Hungarian authorities the Crown of St Stephen, which had been in American custody since 1945. In the televised ceremony of its return four goose-stepping soldiers of the Hungarian People's Army guided the Crown into parliament, in a Sovietized version of the ceremonial walk of the traditional Crown Guards.

The story of the return of the Crown to Kádár is well known. Attila Simontsits produced a massive document collection on the Crown. Tibor Glant wrote the best overview available of the 'American adventure' of the Crown from 1945 to 1978, and Katalin Kádár Lynn presented a study of the pressure exerted by émigrés on the Carter administration.<sup>1</sup> The return of the Crown gained worldwide attention in the press in 1978, and again in Hungary around the thirtieth anniversary of the ceremony in 2008.<sup>2</sup>

Not only the architect of 'goulash' Communism János Kádár, but also his Stalinist predecessor, Mátyás Rákosi, demanded the return of

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<sup>1</sup> Tibor Glant, *A szent korona amerikai kalandja, 1945–1978*, Debrecen, 1997; Tibor Glant, 'American-Hungarian Relations and the Return of the Holy Crown', in R. William Hupchik (ed.), *Hungary's Historical Legacies: Studies in Honor of Béla Várdy*, New York, 2001, pp. 169–86; Katalin Kádár Lynn, 'The Return of the Crown of St Stephen and its Subsequent Impact on the Carter Administration', *East European Quarterly*, 34, 2000, 2, pp. 181–215; Attila Simontsits (ed.), *The Last Battle for St Stephen's Crown*, Toronto, 1983. I would like to thank the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) for funding for this project, and István Deák, Jan C. Behrends, Tibor Glant, Ádám Somorjai, Kees Teszelszky, Eric Weaver and the anonymous *SEER* reviewers for their comments.

<sup>2</sup> Gábor Murányi, 'Korona visszaadási ceremónia 1978-ban. Mindenkinék – akit illet', *HVG*, 3 January 2008 <<http://hvg.hu/kultura/200801HVGFriss104.aspx>> [accessed 1 June 2009].

the precious relic. In both cases, historians left one key question unanswered: why did Communists from Rákosi onward covet the Crown? There is now a growing body of literature that shows that Communist movements and regimes generally attempted to co-opt national symbols.<sup>3</sup> Yet the Crown was a symbol with monarchic, irredentist and religious connotations. What made it so desirable to a regime that claimed to be republican, internationalist and secular? Hungary's fascist leader, Ferenc Szálasi, swore an oath of allegiance on the Crown after he gained power in a *coup d'état*. Surely, to Communists, this was a tainted symbol?

The first Communist demand for its return came in the summer of 1950, when Hungarian émigrés worldwide reacted with horror to news stories in the *Washington Post* that Robert Vogeler, an American businessman imprisoned in Hungary in November 1949 on trumped-up charges of espionage, was to be exchanged for the Crown of St Stephen. Exiles bombarded the State Department with letters, beseeching the Americans not to hand over the Crown. The State Department denied that the Crown was part of the negotiations.

It is now clear that in September 1950 the Hungarians did make an official request for the Crown, but the question remains: was this the first request for the Crown, or had it been part of the negotiations all along?<sup>4</sup> In any case, why did Rákosi put the Crown on the agenda? The most important general works on the Crown or US-Hungarian relations by Tibor Glant<sup>5</sup> and László Borhi<sup>6</sup> do not treat this episode in depth and simply present the Crown as a quid pro quo for Vogeler. Susan Carruthers covers the Vogeler case in detail, but looks especially at its reception in the US media, and pays little attention to the role of the Crown in the negotiations.<sup>7</sup>

As presented in this article, State Department files at the National Archives in Washington and Hungarian foreign ministry records at the Hungarian National Archives in Budapest answer some of these questions. The reports written by US ambassador to Budapest Nathaniel P. Davis are particularly rewarding.<sup>8</sup> He composed artfully written

<sup>3</sup> For an overview, see Martin Mevius, 'Reappraising Communism and Nationalism', *Nationalities Papers*, 37, 2009, 4, pp. 377–400.

<sup>4</sup> Csaba Szabó: 'Az "elveszett" magyar Szent Korona hazatérése 1978-ban' <[http://www.natarch.hu/archivnet/old/rovat/cikk.php?cikk\\_kod=268](http://www.natarch.hu/archivnet/old/rovat/cikk.php?cikk_kod=268)>.

<sup>5</sup> Glant, *A szent korona amerikai kalandja*, p. 40.

<sup>6</sup> László Borhi, *Hungary in the Cold War, 1945–1956: Between the United States and the Soviet Union*, Budapest, 2004, p. 184.

<sup>7</sup> Susan L. Carruthers, *Cold War Captives: Imprisonment, Escape, and Brainwashing*, Berkeley, CA, 2009, pp. 136–73.

<sup>8</sup> Davis held the rank of minister rather than ambassador, which was reserved for emissaries to larger countries. For the sake of legibility I am not following State Department jargon, but instead the Hungarian example, which did not make any distinction, calling him *követ* (ambassador).

memoranda full of keen observations on human behaviour. The files of his main counterpart, Under State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Andor Berei, husband of notoriously doctrinaire Marxist historian Erzsébet Andics, while less entertaining, mostly corroborate Davis's version of events and fill in some important gaps. What appears from these documents is that the Crown was not initially the subject of the negotiations, but only became so because of a careless leak to the press and the speculative reporting of an Associated Press journalist.

This article covers three aspects of legitimacy: the role the Crown played in the international recognition of the regime, notions of national legitimacy linked to the Crown, and the legal dispute concerning American retention of the Crown. These played an important role in Hungarian and US propaganda, and the protests by Hungarian exiles, but left ordinary Hungarians mostly unimpressed. These topics are explored in three main sections: first by examining the legality of the removal of the Crown from Hungary, then by looking at the role of the Crown in the Vogeler case and, finally, by analysing public opinion at the time of the return of the Crown in 1978. Not only because these are relevant to the debate, but because they have been previously uncovered and are based in part on new sources.

### *International and National Legitimacy*

Though no documents have yet surfaced that spell out Rákosi's motives, the negotiations on Vogeler strongly suggest he never seriously expected to get the Crown back and merely used it as a bargaining chip. At the height of the Cold War, international recognition was probably less important to Rákosi than it was to Kádár: internationally, the Hungarians did not seek American approval but viciously attacked the United States in their propaganda.

In contrast to Rákosi, Kádár put the return of the Crown squarely on the bilateral agenda. Seen as the oppressor of the 1956 revolution and hangman of Imre Nagy, Kádár arguably possessed less domestic and international legitimacy than even Rákosi before him. Additionally, unlike Rákosi, Kádár had a real chance of success. The doctrine of peaceful coexistence and the onset of détente, as well as Hungary's relatively liberal dictatorship and reformist economic policies, made it progressively more plausible that the Americans would one day return the Crown.

St Stephen's Crown was further linked to the national legitimacy of the regime. Routinely abused as 'agents of Moscow', the Hungarian Communists appropriated national symbols in order to bolster their patriotic standing. They preferred revolutionary national symbols: the party presented itself as the heir to the revolution of 1848 and of sixteenth-century peasant uprisings. In the Hungarian Communist

national self-image, there was little place for overly religious or aristocratic symbols, and irredentist statues set up by the Horthy regime were usually removed.<sup>9</sup>

As a monarchic and religious symbol the Crown was anathema to what the regime stood for. According to tradition, Pope Sylvester II presented the Crown to Hungary's founding monarch, King Stephen I, later canonized as St Stephen, who crowned himself with it in the year 1000, dedicating Hungary to the Virgin Mary, which was hardly compatible with officially professed atheism. The Crown was also an irredentist symbol. The 'Doctrine of the Holy Crown' (*Szent Koronatan*) legitimized Hungarian rule over the 'Lands of St Stephen', or all of historical Hungary.<sup>10</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the interwar Horthy regime adopted Crown Doctrine in order to legitimize its claims on territory lost to its neighbours, making the crown particularly problematic to the Communist regime which rejected the Horthy era and denounced irredentism. Yet St Stephen was too popular a figure to attack frontally. Instead, the regime transformed 20 August, the holiday of St Stephen, into both 'new bread day' and 'day of the constitution', in which St Stephen appeared on the margins in secularized form, as King Stephen the First.<sup>11</sup> By presenting the new Stalinist constitution on 20 August 1949, the People's Republic implicitly underlined the continuity with St Stephen's Hungary, albeit without reference to the missing Crown, which Rákosi presented simply as an important historical artefact that belonged in a Hungarian museum. Kádár's approach was different: he attempted to change the Crown from a religious symbol into a secular one denoting national independence.

All the same Holy Crown Doctrine in theory provided legitimizing potential even for an ungodly Communist regime, mostly from the point of view of its enemies. After all, according to the Doctrine not the monarch, the Crown is the bearer of Hungarian national sovereignty. Holy Crown doctrine explains why foreign, Habsburg rulers could legitimately be kings of Hungary, and why Horthy's Hungary could be a monarchy without a king. Although there are no indications that Holy Crown Doctrine played any conscious role in the

<sup>9</sup> See Martin Mevius, *Agents of Moscow: The Hungarian Communist Party and the Origins of Socialist Patriotism, 1941–1953*, Oxford, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion on Holy Crown Doctrine as an 'invented tradition', see Roger Cornelis Emiel Teszelszky, 'De Sacra Corona Regni Hungariae. De kroon van Hongarije en de ontwikkeling van de vroegmoderne identiteit (1572–1665)', unpublished PhD thesis, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2006, ch. 1; László Péter, 'The Holy Crown of Hungary, Visible and Invisible', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 81, 2003, 3, pp. 421–511.

<sup>11</sup> See A. Von Klimó, *Nation, Konfession, Geschichte: zur nationalen Geschichtskultur Ungarns im europäischen Kontext (1860–1948)*, Munich, 2003.

Communist demand for the Crown, it was instrumental in the protest of the political right against its return. Indeed, Ferenc Szálasi escaped with the Crown from Hungary precisely because he believed in its legitimizing powers.

Szálasi's escape with the Crown led to the construction of two conflicting legal myths about the American guardianship of the Crown which first gained wide public attention during the Vogeler case. The US State Department claimed that the Crown had not been captured by American forces as German war booty, but had been handed over by a group of Hungarian officers into US custody for safe-keeping. The distinction was important, as according to the 1945 ceasefire agreement and the 1947 Paris Peace treaty the US was not obliged to return property that had been taken to Germany voluntarily, to be kept out of the reach of the Red Army. Their Hungarian counterparts rejected this claim, and pointed out that the Crown had been surrendered by 'fascists' and 'war criminals'. Though the participants and Communist historians have discussed the removal of the Crown in detail, independent observers have not explicitly spoken out as to which of the two legal myths was the most accurate, which is why they need to be discussed before proceeding to the Vogeler case.

### 1. *The Custodians of the Crown: A Debatable Legal Myth*

The Crown could only legally be moved from its hiding place through agreement between the Prime Minister and the Crown Guards. In case of a disagreement, parliament was to make a decision.<sup>12</sup> As the Red Army advanced, the last legal prime minister of Hungary, Géza Lakatos, and commander of the Crown Guards Anton Radvánszky, agreed to present the Crown to the papal nuntius for safekeeping.<sup>13</sup> Szálasi illegally removed the Crown from Hungary: not only did he gain power in a *coup d'état*, but Radvánszky disagreed with the removal of the Crown from Hungary and resigned in protest at the decision. Needless to say, Szálasi never consulted parliament about this dispute.

Holy Crown Doctrine provided an important motive for Szálasi to flee with the Crown. Szálasi later said he decided to bring the Crown with him because 'in Hungary the Holy Crown and head of state are inseparable'.<sup>14</sup> When preparing the Arrow Cross coup, Szálasi told

<sup>12</sup> For the legal context, see A. Radvánszky, 'Das Amt des Kronhüters im Staatsrecht und in der Geschichte Ungarns', *Ungarn Jahrbuch. Zeitschrift für die Kunde Ungarns und verwandte Gebiete*, Munich, 1981, pp. 1–63 (pp. 43–45).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>14</sup> Márton Himler, *Így néztek ki a magyar nemzet strásói: a magyar háborús bűnösök amerikaiak előtt tett vallomásának hiteles szövege*, New York, 1958, p. 138.

German ambassador Edmund Veesenmayer the Crown must be kept out of Horthy's hands: 'Not the Regent, but the physical reality of the Crown represents sovereignty.' Later, Arrow Cross foreign minister Gábor Kemény argued that 'in Hungarian history, the physical possession of the Crown has always decided power'.<sup>15</sup> For the same reason, Deputy Prime Minister Jenő Szöllősi rejected pleas from the Crown Guards to hide the Crown in the Abbey of Pannonhalma, because he distrusted the Catholic clergy's intentions with the relic, assuming them to be Habsburg loyalists.<sup>16</sup>

Two days after the Arrow Cross *coup d'état* on 17 October 1944, Ferenc Szálasi discussed as 'a forethought' the possibility of removing the Crown to Germany for safekeeping.<sup>17</sup> Veesenmayer agreed, and the German High Command offered Castle Sigmaringen as a hiding place.<sup>18</sup> After swearing his oath on the Crown, on 4 November 1944 Szálasi ordered it to be removed from Buda castle. As the Red Army advanced into Hungary, the Arrow Cross leadership fled into Austria, in a convoy that included, besides members of the government, a truck with the Crown jewels, accompanied by twelve Crown Guards.

Even with Nazi Germany collapsing and the Red Army pounding Budapest into ruins, Szálasi counted on his political survival and banked on the legitimacy conveyed by the Crown. He wanted to keep it out of the hands of not only the enemy, but also his competitors. On its travels out of Hungary, Szöllősi demanded the Crown be kept 'constantly' in the vicinity of the fleeing Arrow Cross government.<sup>19</sup> Szálasi had no intention of handing it over to the Americans. He considered it 'my right and duty to take care that it would not fall into enemy hands'. That explicitly included the Americans.<sup>20</sup>

Crown Guard Ernő Pajtás succeeded Antal Radvánszky as commander of the Crown Guards. His account forms the thin basis for the claim that 'Hungarian officers' handed the Crown 'into care'. According to Pajtás, in the last Arrow Cross government meeting on 25 April, someone suggested to 'cut up' the Crown and divide it among the ministers, in order to reassemble it 'after the final German victory'. This shocked the Guards into action, who escaped with the Crown on

<sup>15</sup> Budapest, Hungarian National Archives (Magyar Országos Levéltár, MOL), McCartney Papers, microfilm reel 14085m p. 66. These documents were published in Elek Karsai (ed.), *Szálasi naplója. A nyilvánosság előtt a II. világháború idején*, Budapest, 1978.

<sup>16</sup> Radvánszky, 'Das Amt des Kronhüters', pp. 1–63.

<sup>17</sup> Budapest, Budapest Capital City Archive, (Budapest Főváros Levéltára, BFL), 'Tanulmányi jegyzőkönyv', XXV.1.a, 161, XV.20.71, 0006.0185.

<sup>18</sup> 'Records of the Last Inspection of the Crown Jewels in the Presence of Deputy Prime Minister and the Crown Guardians', in Simontsits, *Last Battle for St Stephen's Crown*, pp. 51–58, 28.

<sup>19</sup> Esztergom, Primate Archive (Primási Levéltár, PL). Mindszenty Trial Collection, V700/9a, 34–36. 'A Magyar Szentkorona útja Budapestről a mai őrzési helyéig.'

<sup>20</sup> Himler, *Igy néztek ki a magyar nemzet sírásói*, p. 138.



1 May, eventually surrendering to US forces.<sup>21</sup> In US imprisonment, Pajtás then met Horthy, arguably still Hungary's legitimate ruler, who believed the Crown should not be regarded as 'spoils of war' because 'Hungarian authorities' had transported it out of the country. American officers then promised Pajtás that the Crown would only be delivered to a liberated Hungary.<sup>22</sup>

Pajtás's account, of which he had several versions, is unreliable. He was no ordinary Crown Guard, but the childhood playmate of Ferenc Szálasi in Kassa (Košice), and had attended the military academy in Kőszeg with him as a young man.<sup>23</sup> Other sources reinforce the impression that Szálasi dictated the destiny of the Crown almost to the end. The minutes of the last meeting of the Arrow Cross government on 25 April 1945 simply state that Szálasi 'made the necessary arrangements regarding the Holy Crown'.<sup>24</sup> Interrogation reports of members of the Arrow Cross government by US and Hungarian authorities reveal nothing of the dramatic story of the planned dismantling of the Crown.<sup>25</sup> Instead, Szálasi gave specific instructions to his aide, Ernő Gömbös: in case of his death, if there was no national-socialist government in Hungary in five years time, then the Crown was to be handed over to the 'German Empire'.<sup>26</sup>

Most likely acting under Szálasi's orders, the Crown Guards took the Crown from its strongbox, placed it in half an army oil barrel and buried it in the ground near Mattsee. According to Pajtás, Szöllősi approved the escape plan.<sup>27</sup> As the reality of defeat finally sunk in, Arrow Cross Foreign Minister Gábor Kemény offered to open negotiations with the Americans on 4 May 1945, arguing 'the possession of the Holy Crown of St Stephen as symbol of the sovereign' demonstrated 'without a doubt' the 'constitutionality' of Arrow Cross rule.<sup>28</sup> The convoy, including Arrow Cross leaders Szálasi and Jenő Szöllősi, and the truck

<sup>21</sup> PL, V700/9a, pp. 34–36. This account differs from the one given by Pajtás in 'A Szent Korona kalandos útja Budától Németországig', *Hungária. Hontalan Magyarok Hetilapja* (20 May, 27 May and 3 June 1949).

<sup>22</sup> College Park, MD, USA, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Research Group 59. Bureau of Intelligence and Research. Office of Soviet and East European Analysis. Intelligence Reports on the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe 1942–1960. 'Intelligence report No 5867. The Holy Crown of Hungary: status since WW II.'

<sup>23</sup> PL, V700/9a, pp. 34–36.

<sup>24</sup> Karsai, *Szálasi naplója*, pp. 481–90.

<sup>25</sup> Márton Himler interrogated members of the Arrow Cross government for the US army. He summarized the interrogations in Himler, *Igy néztek ki a magyar nemzet sírásói*. The original interrogation reports have not yet surfaced. The Hungarian authorities then interviewed the Arrow Cross leaders again in preparation for their trials. These can be found in the relevant case files in the Budapest Capital City Archives (BFL).

<sup>26</sup> Himler, *Igy néztek ki a magyar nemzet sírásói*, p. 138.

<sup>27</sup> *Hungária*, 3 June 1949.

<sup>28</sup> 'Abschrift einer Denkschrift der Szálasi Regierung', in Radvánszky, 'Das Amt des Kronhüter', p. 63.



with the empty strongbox surrendered at the beginning of May to the US Seventh Army. Pajtás did not plan to hand over the Crown 'into care' at this stage, but remained silent about the burial of the Crown, because he hoped Hungary and Austria might escape a lengthy occupation, so that 'foreign hands' need not touch it.<sup>29</sup> The Americans did not order the box opened until 24 July 1945.<sup>30</sup> When they found it was empty, they interrogated Gömbös and Crown guard Ernő Pajtás, who only after prolonged questioning revealed where the Crown was buried.<sup>31</sup>

In the summer of 1945 American and Hungarian army authorities still operated on the presumption that the Crown was to be returned to Hungary, which illustrates the fact that at this time the Americans still considered it captured booty. On 27 June 1945, the Foreign Minister of Hungary's Provisional Government János Gyöngyösi asked for its return.<sup>32</sup> Holy Crown doctrine inspired the political right in Hungary to prevent this. József Waigand, a Catholic theologian, urged József Mindszenty to ask the Americans to 'return it to the Holy Father, from whose hands we received it a thousand years ago'. Waigand feared the coalition government would not treat it 'with the respect a national relic deserves' but 'in the very best case turn it into a profane museum piece'. Waigand even 'dare[d] to assume from our present leaders that they would present it as reparations to the Russians'.<sup>33</sup> Shortly afterwards, Mindszenty indeed approached the American authorities, asking them to hand over 'our most significant constitutional and historic relic' to the Vatican for safekeeping.<sup>34</sup> In response, in April 1946, the US embassy formulated in a telegram the legal myth that would be the American position for decades to come: the 'Hungarian authorities' had 'handed the Crown into care' to the US army, which meant it need not be returned under the terms of the ceasefire with Hungary.<sup>35</sup>

Neither the US nor Papal authorities enthused about the Vatican solution, and so the fate of the Crown remained in the balance. In January 1947, the Hungarian Restitution Commission in Germany formally requested the return of the Crown. Prime Minister Ferenc

<sup>29</sup> 'A magyar Szentkorona és a koronázásijelvények [sic] útja az amerikai hadseregnél.' PL, V700/9a, pp. 46–47.

<sup>30</sup> 'Seventh Army Interrogation Center APO 758, US Army', in *The Last Battle for St Stephen's Crown*, ed. Attila Simontsits, Toronto, 1983, pp. 93–95.

<sup>31</sup> Himler, *Igy néztek ki a magyar nemzet sírásói*, p. 138.

<sup>32</sup> NARA, 'Intelligence report No 5867'.

<sup>33</sup> Waigand to Mindszenty, 4 February 1946, PL, V700/9a, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> PL, V700/9a, p. 10. Draft letter to US Ambassador, undated.

<sup>35</sup> Ádam Somorjai, Tibor Zinner (eds), *Majd' halálra ítélve. Dokumentumok Mindszenty élettörténetéhez*, Budapest, 2008, pp. 284–85.

Nagy, however, blocked this, and asked the Crown to be kept in safekeeping by the US authorities.<sup>36</sup> In August 1947 Mindszenty again implored the Pope to request custody of the Crown instead of returning it to Hungary, and in September 1947 sent a letter to US Ambassador Chapin with the same message.<sup>37</sup> In these entreaties Mindszenty referred to the constitutional connotations of the Crown, and his emissary in the Vatican, Gedeon Petterfy, complained that his American counterpart had 'no clue whatsoever about the historical, and legal meaning of the Crown or of its hallowed character'.<sup>38</sup> At this stage an American diplomat informed Petterfy that 'if the Hungarian government asks for it explicitly, then it would be difficult for them to deny its return'.<sup>39</sup> By March 1948, however, the State Department advised the American embassy in Budapest that it considered the return of the Crown 'inopportune' due to the 'governmental and political conditions now existing'.<sup>40</sup> This was clearly a political, not a legal judgement.

The basis for the American legal myth according to which 'Hungarian officers' had handed over the Crown into custody 'for safekeeping' was a very shaky one. In reality, a fleeing illegitimate government had transported it out of the country against Hungarian law, primarily to bolster its own legitimacy. Szálasi did indeed plan to keep the Crown safe — but in German, not American custody.

The basis for the war of words between the Hungarian and US governments during the Vogeler case was hereby set. While the American government withheld recognition of the regime by retaining the Crown, the Hungarian Communists could with some justification claim the Crown had been 'looted' by 'fascists'. The Hungarian position was also problematic, as the last freely elected prime minister of Hungary had explicitly requested the Americans to keep the Crown, which arguably gave the US the discretion under the Peace Treaty it formally needed. Neither the State Department nor the Hungarian Communist leadership ever went into detailed discussions to support their positions, which illustrates that they were legal fictions that propped up a political viewpoint. These became part of a propaganda war during 1950 and 1951, when the Crown became the centre of international media hype during the Vogeler affair.

<sup>36</sup> Tibor Rászlai, 'A Szent Korona hazatérése', in *Valóság*, 49, 2006, 6 <<http://valosagonline.hu/index.php?oldal=cikk&cazon=255&lap=0>> [accessed 1 June 2009].

<sup>37</sup> Budapest, Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security (Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára, ÁBTL), V700/2, pp. 1–2.

<sup>38</sup> ÁBTL, V700/44, pp. 341–44.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> NARA, 'Intelligence report No 5867'.

## 2. *The Vogeler Affair and the Crown of St Stephen*

It was not only the Americans who observed József Mindszenty's attempts to move the Crown to the Vatican, but also the ÁVO (Államvédelmi Osztály), the Communist secret police. Rákosi gave the Crown a small part in the show trial of Mindszenty, which commenced in February 1949, by personally insisting on the inclusion of the Crown in Mindszenty's confession. In the trial, much like Arrow Cross prime minister Jenő Szöllősi had feared in 1944, the prosecutor accused Mindszenty of intending to crown Otto von Habsburg with it. This was utter nonsense; Mindszenty's captured correspondence reveals no clues to this effect.<sup>41</sup> Party propagandists dealt with the unwelcome religious and irredentist associations of the Crown by simply ignoring them, presenting it instead as a historical relic, and attacked Mindszenty and the Americans for depriving the Hungarian people of a valuable museum piece. By implication, the Communist Hungarian state appeared to be acting in the national interest. They used the same propaganda line during the Vogeler case, although it was then not deliberate machinations, but blind coincidence which introduced the Crown onto the scene.

As very little has been written about the Vogeler case at all in English, it is necessary to discuss the case in detail in order to ascertain exactly how the Crown became involved in the affair. Robert A. Vogeler was the Vienna-based Assistant Vice President of International Telephone and Telegraph (IT&T), an American communications company. He made several trips to Budapest in 1949 to discuss the nationalization of Standard Electric, a Hungarian subsidiary of IT&T. The negotiations stalled because the American military authorities blocked the handing over of certain military licences.<sup>42</sup> This most likely irked both Rákosi and economics front man Ernő Gerő, who were kept informed about the lack of progress.<sup>43</sup> The Hungarians also feared the Americans would double-cross them and give them obsolete radio technology.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the Communist leadership eyed the pre-Communist specialists and managers at the Standard factory with suspicion. Gerő noted in April 1949 that 'the majority of the old leaders are one way or another men of the Americans', and demanded that 'we should place some useful leading cadres in the Standard'.<sup>45</sup>

The wave of nationalizations in Hungary at the time and the desire to purge factories of undesirable 'reactionaries' form the backdrop to

<sup>41</sup> Mevius, *Agents of Moscow*, pp. 239–40; PL, V700/9a.

<sup>42</sup> MOL 276.116/á5, 1.

<sup>43</sup> MOL 276.116/á6, 23a.

<sup>44</sup> MOL 276.116/á6, 5.

<sup>45</sup> MOL 276.116/á6, 72, 94.

the Standard case. The failure to close the deal was probably the main reason for the Hungarian authorities' tightening of the noose around Standard. Vogeler was a vulnerable target. In April 1949 Viennese police raided the local Austro-American Club, of which Vogeler was Vice President, on suspicion of illegal gambling. In the ensuing scandal, the Austrian Communist press claimed the club was a cover for espionage and the running of refugees out of Eastern Europe, and accused Vogeler of being a spy.<sup>46</sup> An informer in a Budapest hotel reported on his 'suspicious' behaviour, and from November 1949 the Hungarian state security organization, by now rechristened State Defence Authority (Államvédelmi Hatóság, ÁVH), bugged Vogeler's telephone line and shadowed him.<sup>47</sup> But what immediately brought on the wave of arrests of Standard employees was the attempted defection of Standard's executive director, Imre Geiger, in which Vogeler was involved.<sup>48</sup>

After his release, Vogeler told a stunned press corps that there was 'some truth' in the allegations made against him.<sup>49</sup> Shortly after Vogeler's arrest, US Ambassador Nathaniel P. Davis cryptically reported to Washington, 'we have some indication Vogeler was seeking information for another agency and may be involved in an attempt [of a] Hungarian family [to] escape [the] country'.<sup>50</sup>

In 'Third Man' Vienna, Vogeler did know some shady characters, including people smugglers. As the negotiations on the Standard contract slowly collapsed, Geiger became increasingly nervous and asked Vogeler to help him out of the country. Vogeler agreed. His wife, Lucille, got in touch with a group of people in Vienna 'who did this as a regular thing'. In coded telephone calls Robert and Lucille Vogeler agreed on a leaving date for Geiger.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Robert A. Vogeler and Leigh White, *I was Stalin's Prisoner*, New York, 1952, p. 52. This tidbit found its way into Vogeler's ÁVH file: BFL. VII. 5/e, 353, V-600/5/a 2-8.

<sup>47</sup> BFL VII. 5/e, 353, V-600/5/a, pp. 14-17. Most of the files dealing with the Standard Electric trial have been moved from the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security (ÁBT) to the Budapest Capital City Archives (BFL).

<sup>48</sup> David S. Frey developed the point of 'the realities behind the show trial' at the 2009 conference of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies. David S. Frey, 'Robert Vogeler and the Trial of the Standard Electric Company in Hungary', AAASS, Boston, 12-16 November 2009.

<sup>49</sup> 'Hungary, it could happen to anybody', *Time*, 7 May 1950 <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,856757,00.html>> [accessed 1 June 2009].

<sup>50</sup> 'Budapest to Secretary of State. No 1300', 21 November 1949. NARA, RG 59; General Records of the Department of State; Bureau of European Affairs; Office of European Affairs; Records Relating to Hungarian Affairs, 1949-1953, Hungary, USAF plane incident to Vogeler Case, #1, Vogeler 1.

<sup>51</sup> 'Transcript of Proceedings. Interview with Mr Robert A. Vogeler. Monday, May 31, 1951. 2:25 pm to 3:45 pm', 31 May 1951. NARA, RG 59; General Records of the Department of State; Bureau of European Affairs; Office of European Affairs; Records Relating to Hungarian Affairs, 1949-1953, Vogeler Interviews.

The attempt failed. Vogeler treated the surveillance as a game. On one occasion, he played a joke on agents following him, walking out of the Hotel Astoria wearing a false beard to giggles from pretty Budapest barmaid Edina Dőry.<sup>52</sup> The ÁVH noted in humourless prose that 'the atmosphere grew more rowdy, and Vogeler took from his pockets a beard, moustache and glasses, and wearing this he amused his company'.<sup>53</sup> On another occasion, he bought two of the secret agents a drink.<sup>54</sup> Testifying to the amateurism in the defection attempt was the fact that Geiger's group quickly grew from three to six people, including as a last addition Edina Dőry.<sup>55</sup> One of Gerő's new cadres at Standard betrayed the group. A secretary, 'in whom the Americans and British completely trust', reported to her superiors her suspicions that 'Geiger is preparing to defect, with help from the Americans'.<sup>56</sup> The ÁVH arrested Geiger at the Austrian-Hungarian border on 10 November, and Vogeler on 18 November en route to Vienna, and on 21 November picked up the British accountant of Standard, Edgar Sanders.

#### *First American Countermeasures*

For American ambassador to Budapest Nathaniel Davis, this was the start of a seventeen-month-long attempt to get Vogeler out. Ambassador Davis met Foreign Minister Gyula Kállai on 19 November, and asked him to investigate the case. On 22 November Kállai confirmed the arrest of Vogeler and claimed he had confessed to charges of 'espionage and sabotage'.<sup>57</sup> Davis's immediate concern was arranging consular access to Vogeler and a meeting with Rákosi on the issue. The first request was rejected and on the second the Hungarians kept stalling. Halfway through December, Davis attempted a ruse. He staged a telephone call with the State Department 'for the benefit of the *kibitzers*'.<sup>58</sup> It was assumed 'the Hungarians will listen in on the Minister's telephone conversation'.<sup>59</sup> This trick had been used to free two other Americans, Paul Ruedemann and George Bannantine, employees of the Hungarian-American Oil Industry Joint Stock Company (Magyar Amerikai Olajipari Rt, MAORT), after their arrest in September 1948.

<sup>52</sup> Vogeler and White, *I was Stalin's Prisoner*, p. 115.

<sup>53</sup> BFL VII. 5/e, 353, V-600/5/a, pp. 2-8.

<sup>54</sup> 'Transcript of Proceedings. Interview with Mr Robert A. Vogeler. Monday, June 1, 1951 1:45 to 5:05 pm.' NARA, Vogeler Interviews.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> MOL 276.116/45, 1.

<sup>57</sup> 'Davis to Secretary of State. No 1305', 22 November 1949. NARA, Vogeler 1.

<sup>58</sup> For *kibitzers*, see the Oxford English Dictionary: 'An onlooker at cards, etc., esp. one who offers unwanted advice; a busybody, an officious meddler.' 'Budapest to Secretary of State NIACT 1348', 11 December 1949. NARA, Vogeler 1.

<sup>59</sup> 'EUR Mr Thompson to EE Mr Campbell', 13 December 1949. NARA, Vogeler 1.

The Hungarians released both officials and expelled them after obtaining signed confessions of espionage.<sup>60</sup> In the call, Davis announced retaliatory measures if Vogeler was not released. The ploy did not work.

Davis then protested to Kállai about the unhelpful attitude of the Hungarian authorities, stated his conviction that the charges against Vogeler were 'completely false' and mentioned for the first time possible sanctions: firstly the 'forbidding [of] Americans to travel to Hungary'. The point in itself, said Davis later, was 'absurd': 'there are no hordes of Americans who want to go to Hungary and if there were they would not get visas.' But 'Hungary was one of the two or three places in the world we were saying wasn't good enough to receive American citizens.'<sup>61</sup> The second measure was the threat to close Hungarian consulates in the United States: if the American consul was not permitted to visit an American citizen, then 'justification of and the utility of the Hungarian consulates in the United States' was up for debate.<sup>62</sup>

A third countermeasure concerned the restitution of goods from the US zone of occupation in Germany. In early 1948 the United States suspended delivery of looted goods. US authorities claimed that a great deal of property had not been taken in 1945 by force, but by owners of their own free will 'to keep it out of the hands of the communists'. One of Davis's tasks as an ambassador was to find a solution to the impasse.<sup>63</sup> Pending the release of Vogeler, the United States halted discussions on the restitution of Hungarian goods. On 9 December Davis informed the office of the High Commissioner for Germany (HICOG) that, pending a favourable decision on the Vogeler case, the 'Legation does not intend [to] cooperate [with the] Hungarians on [the] restitution question'.<sup>64</sup> The Crown was not mentioned in any of these dispatches. But this third countermeasure on restitution of captured goods would lead six months later to the mistaken assumption that the Crown was involved in the negotiations.

Hoping for a swift solution following informal pressure, the Americans delayed taking formal diplomatic action. As the Hungarians kept stalling, Davis suggested that the State Department read the Hungarians the riot act.<sup>65</sup> On 20 December 1949, the Hungarian ambassador in

<sup>60</sup> 'Dean Acheson to Nathaniel P. Davis NIACT 706', 11 December 1949. NARA, Vogeler 1.

<sup>61</sup> 'Press and radio news conference', 15 June 1951. NARA, Vogeler 10.

<sup>62</sup> 'Notes for Conversation with Foreign Minister at Noon, December 14, 1949.' MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1965-9d.

<sup>63</sup> 'Press and radio news conference', 15 June, 1951. NARA, Vogeler 10.

<sup>64</sup> 'From Budapest to Secretary of State No 1344', 9 December, 1949. NARA, Vogeler 1.

<sup>65</sup> 'Budapest to Secretary of State NIACT 1348.' NARA, Vogeler 1.

Washington, Imre Horváth, received an official note condemning the arrest and announcing the imposition of travel restrictions on US citizens to Hungary.<sup>66</sup> The United States government officially denounced the 'inaction, evasions and bad faith' on the part of the Hungarian authorities.<sup>67</sup> The Hungarian authorities responded in kind on 24 December, rejecting the American note as a 'rude attempt' to 'interfere with the interior affairs of the Hungarian people's republic'.<sup>68</sup>

On 30 December Davis met Kállai again, and suggested now that the Hungarians release Vogeler as a New Year's gesture. Kállai was not amused: 'such jokes cannot form the basis of serious negotiations'.<sup>69</sup> Davis then asked Kállai to release Vogeler regardless of whether he was guilty or not. The Americans would then consider 'the whole exchange of notes as having never happened' and the United States and Hungary could then improve their economic relations, including the return of Hungarian rolling stock in Germany.<sup>70</sup> The Hungarians refused. On 1 January 1950, the United States formally withdrew recognition of the Hungarian consulates in New York and Cleveland, which were told to cease work by 15 January 1950.<sup>71</sup> Hungary responded with yet another indignant note, arguing that the Hungarians had a right to forbid consular visits to suspects of espionage, and announced that Hungary would not tolerate 'any foreign interventions in its internal affairs'.<sup>72</sup>

### *Davis Meets Rákosi: The First Press Leak*

The Hungarians published the full text of the note and the discussions in the press, according to Davis 'referring to them in such a manner as to distort the meaning of what has been said'.<sup>73</sup> Davis himself was loose-lipped to an Associated Press journalist three weeks later about a discussion with Rákosi, which had taken place on 19 January 1950. Rákosi, Davis later said, was 'a very interesting fellow', but hard to talk to 'because he is smart as a whip and at least always one jump ahead

<sup>66</sup> 'Assistant Secretary for European Affairs to The Under Secretary. Appointment with the Hungarian minister', 20 December 1949. NARA, Vogeler 1.

<sup>67</sup> 'Note of 20 December No 735.' NARA, Vogeler 1.

<sup>68</sup> 'Verbal Note 14075/1949', 24 December 1949. MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1965-9d, 14075/1949.

<sup>69</sup> 'Feljegyzés', 30 December 1949. MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1965-9d, 13856/1949.

<sup>70</sup> 'Verbal Note 14075/1949', MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1965-9d, 14075/1949.

<sup>71</sup> 'No 1', 3 January 1950. MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1965-9d, 0146/1950. The note was actually not delivered until 3 January. On 2 January First Secretary of the embassy Gerald Mokma visited Kállai to give him the opportunity of releasing Vogeler before he formally handed over the note. 'Másolat. Feljegyzés', 2 January 1950. MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1962-9d, 14018/1950.

<sup>72</sup> 'Verbal Note 0146/1950.' MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1965-9d, 14018/1950.

<sup>73</sup> 'Budapest to Secretary of State No 55', 27 January 1950. NARA, Vogeler 2.



in any argument'.<sup>74</sup> Rákosi chose to speak English, 'haltingly at first', but 'his conversation became quite fluent as he warmed to the discussion and he was seldom at a loss for a word'.<sup>75</sup> On the Vogeler case, Rákosi 'was both eloquent and adamant'. He complained about American spies, who he described as 'very clumsy', 'very inexperienced' spies who 'got drunk and made a nuisance of themselves'. Vogeler, however, was 'a clever spy'. The use of 'clumsy American spies', however, was still tolerable, which is why MAORT chief Ruedemann had simply been sent across the border after confessing. Vogeler, on the other hand, was 'a really high class spy', and the Hungarians had 'completely convincing evidence' against him.

When Davis finally managed to interrupt Rákosi's monologue (Rákosi's 'manner of speech is such, that it is difficult to interrupt him'), he protested Vogeler's innocence. Rákosi retorted that Hungary had 'no reason to antagonize a big country and bring up charges of espionage unless they were well founded'. Davis asked, 'why all this spy mania. What was there in Hungary that he thought we should be so anxious to spy on?' Rákosi 'laughed out loud at this and said "Hungary is a very interesting country. Lots of interesting things happen here"'. Vogeler, Rákosi said, would have a 'fair trial' and Davis 'would be convinced of Vogeler's guilt'. The discussion lasted for an hour, when Rákosi impatiently started 'fiddling with a desk clock', signalling an end to the interview.

To Rákosi's fury, Davis leaked details of the meeting to the press. The Associated Press correspondent in Vienna got wind of the talk, and telephoned Davis, asking whether Vogeler had been discussed. Davis admitted the meeting had taken place, and answered that Rákosi had said a trial would be forthcoming in several weeks.<sup>76</sup> After the story broke, Under State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Andor Berei, whom Davis regarded as the 'power behind the throne' of Kállai at the foreign ministry, phoned Davis to express his 'astonishment' that he had passed 'private comments' to the press. He said he 'did not know what procedures I had been taught elsewhere but in Hungary it is long accepted practice not [to] divulge private conversations'. Davis told Berei he had only confided what he believed was 'harmless' information. Berei said Rákosi found the leak 'most unusual and disloyal'.<sup>77</sup> According to local journalists, Rákosi was 'extremely indignant' at the

<sup>74</sup> 'Press and radio news conference', 15 June 1951. NARA, Vogeler 10.

<sup>75</sup> 'Budapest 107 Memorandum of Conversation', 20 January 1950. NARA, Vogeler 2.

<sup>76</sup> 'From Budapest to Secretary of State, No 49', 24 January 1950. NARA, Vogeler 2. The journalist in question may have been Endre Márton, AP-correspondent in Budapest, who filed his stories via Vienna.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

leak. It was not the content of the leak that was the problem, but the mere fact that Davis had made 'any statement at all regarding a private conversation'.<sup>78</sup>

Davis thought the response 'incomprehensible'. On 7 January, the Hungarian government itself had leaked information to the press, including details of private conversations. 'What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander', said Davis.<sup>79</sup> For the moment, the leak had no consequences, but the press leak did contribute to a lack of tolerance towards further leaks, one of which led to the collapse of negotiations in the summer of 1950, in which St Stephen's Crown played a prominent role. This conflict derived from the quite different conceptions of the role of the media in Communist Hungary and the United States. For Davis, the press was an autonomous institution. Davis reported to the State Department that the Rákosi interviews were news 'by any standard of independent journalism'. The AP journalist was engaged in the 'legitimate exercise of his profession', and Davis had merely 'truthfully and properly' answered his questions.<sup>80</sup> The Hungarian leadership saw the press chiefly as a means of propaganda, and assumed that the Americans had a similar control over the media. They would therefore not regard a leak as an accident.

#### *Trial and Negotiations on Release*

The Standard trial began on 17 February. Vogeler confessed to espionage, and was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. Imre Geiger received the death sentence, and Edgar Sanders thirteen years' imprisonment.

Vogeler had not been beaten during his interrogation, nor had he been drugged, but he was interrogated for eighteen hours at a time, given cold baths, and forced to sleep on a cold floor without any socks. The ÁVH put Vogeler under moral pressure by beating his co-defendants. They would organize a 'confrontation' between Vogeler and a witness who claimed Vogeler had been his handler. When Vogeler denied ever having met the witness, the ÁVH interrogators feigned anger at the 'lies' told by the witness, and announced 'we have methods to make these fellows tell the truth'. Then ÁVH officers audibly thrashed the hapless witness in the adjoining cell, confronting Vogeler with the consequences of his persistent silence.<sup>81</sup> According to Vogeler, secret police chief Gábor Péter assured him on the eve of the trial that if he stuck to his story he would probably be exchanged

<sup>78</sup> 'Budapest to Secretary of State No 55,' NARA, Vogeler 2.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> 'From Budapest to Secretary of State, no 124', 20 February 1950. NARA, Vogeler 1.

at some point. Should he cause a scene in court, he risked the death penalty. Under this pressure, Vogeler finally agreed to confess.<sup>82</sup>

Vogeler is to this day presented as a test case of psychological pressure to secure a confession from an innocent victim.<sup>83</sup> However, Vogeler most likely buckled to pressure of a different sort. In his memoirs, Rákosi claimed Vogeler confessed because he had secretly had an affair with a 'baroness' — this would have been Edina Dőry, a 'nice looking, pleasant young lady', and a co-defendant in the Standard trial.<sup>84</sup> Dőry was a former baroness who had to make a living as a bartender after the state had expropriated the family estate. She worked at the Hotel Astoria, where Vogeler stayed as a guest. According to Rákosi, 'when Vogeler understood that during the trial his love life would turn up on the carpet, he declared that he would confess everything'.<sup>85</sup> The story is plausible: Edina Dőry's ÁVH interrogators compelled her to produce an explicit confession in full pornographic detail of her sexual relationship with Vogeler. This confession was translated into English, which indicates it was probably used to confront Vogeler.<sup>86</sup>

### *Contours of an Agreement*

The trial caused a storm of protest in the United States press, putting further pressure on Davis to secure Vogeler's release. On 24 February 1950, the US government took another countermeasure, and froze Hungarian assets.<sup>87</sup> Davis thought that 'sooner or later' the Hungarians would 'want something badly enough from us in exchange for Vogeler, but what that will be and when I cannot now foresee'.<sup>88</sup> What this was became apparent at Davis's next meeting with Rákosi and Andor Berei on 25 March 1950. Davis asked Rákosi to no longer discuss the merits of the case, as they would obviously never agree on the guilt or innocence of Vogeler. Instead, proposed Davis, they should try to find a solution to the political stand-off they were now facing. For the first time, Rákosi hinted that a deal on Vogeler could be made. He mused

<sup>82</sup> 'Transcript of Proceedings. Interview with Mr Robert A. Vogeler. Monday, June 11, 1951 2:30 to 6:00.' NARA, Vogeler Interviews.

<sup>83</sup> Gary Younge, 'Occupations abroad always lead to the erosion of liberties at home', *The Guardian*, 23 June 2008 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/jun/23/guantanamo.humanrights>> [accessed 1 June 2009].

<sup>84</sup> 'Stockholm 575 to Department of State. Connection of Jule B. Smith with the Case of R. Vogeler and E. Sanders and their accomplices before the criminal court in Hungary', 24 May 1950. NARA, Vogeler 6.

<sup>85</sup> Mátyás Rákosi and Levente Sipos, István Feitl and Márta Gelleriné Lázár (eds), *Visszaemlékezések 1940–1956*, vol. 2, Budapest, 1997, p. 764.

<sup>86</sup> István Rév, 'In Mendacio Veritas (In Lies there Lies the Truth)', *Representations*, No. 35, *Special Issue: Monumental Histories*, Summer 1991, pp. 1–20; Rév does not mention the archival source, which is: BFL VIII.5.e.1950-1789-V-355.V600.11, pp. 54, 68–84.

<sup>87</sup> 'Budapest to Secretary of State No 282', 25 April 1950. NARA, Vogeler 6.

<sup>88</sup> 'Memorandum of Conversation', 15 March 1950. NARA. Vogeler 1.

that the Americans were 'asking a good deal but offering little' and cited the Latin proverb 'do ut des'. According to Davis's account 'we were asking him to "do" a good deal but had not offered to "des" anything'. Rákosi hinted at a possible US concession: Voice of America (VOA) broadcasts were, he claimed, interfering with a Hungarian broadcaster on the same wavelength, Radio Petőfi.<sup>89</sup> According to Davis, Rákosi spoke of the VOA in a 'very dispassionate manner'. Davis joked that 'it was not clear from his conversation whether he was objecting to the interference because he could not hear the Petőfi program or whether he did not want to miss anything that the VOA had to offer'.<sup>90</sup> Davis promised to look into the matter that same day.

Rákosi and Davis also discussed the staff of the US embassy. Shortly after the trial, based on the accusations of espionage against Vogeler, the Hungarians demanded a reduction in US embassy staff. Davis announced the reduction of staff by about 30 per cent, not, he insisted, due to Hungarian pressure, but mainly to accelerate cuts the embassy was already making.<sup>91</sup> At the end of the discussion Rákosi then explicitly asked Davis 'not to give an interview to the press on this occasion'. Davis apologized for the previous leak and assured Rákosi that he had not approached the press, but a correspondent had learnt of their last meeting and called him on the telephone. Rákosi, 'still smiling very genially', asked Davis, 'please not to do so again, saying his government was very "exclusive towards the press"'. Davis then promised 'to tell a diplomatic lie'. If queried by the press he would say he had never met Rákosi.<sup>92</sup>

Several weeks later, on 11 April, Andor Berei announced to Davis that the Hungarians were willing to horse trade. As a concession to the Americans, Berei mentioned specifically the reopening of the consulates and the end to VOA interference with Radio Petőfi. Davis thought it 'natural' the consulates should be reopened if the Vogeler case was resolved, and expected that discussions on restitutions could be resolved quickly. He treated the VOA interference as being a technical issue, independent of the negotiations on Vogeler, and claimed surprise that 'the issue is not yet resolved until this day'.<sup>93</sup> Internally, Davis was prepared to give up the VOA frequency, as the Legation had observed that 'PETOFI interference with VOA [is] intermittently so great as to render VOA programs occasionally unintelligible'.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>89</sup> 'Legtel 223. Memorandum of Conversation', 25 March 1950. NARA, Vogeler 2.

<sup>90</sup> 'From Budapest to Department of State, Legtel 229', 1950/03/28. NARA, Vogeler 5.

<sup>91</sup> 'Legtel 223. Memorandum of Conversation', NARA, Vogeler 2.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> 'Feljegyzés', 11 April 1950. MOL XIX-J-1-j-USA-1945-1965-9d, 00506/1950.

<sup>94</sup> 'Budapest to Secretary of State No 255', 12 April 1950. NARA, Vogeler 6.

The contours of an agreement over the return of Vogeler were now clear. First, the Americans were to lift the countermeasures taken after Vogeler's arrest, which included the closing of the consulates, the imposing of travel restrictions to Hungary to American citizens, and the freezing of Hungarian assets. Second, the VOA was to cease its alleged interference. Third, the US was to resume delivery of confiscated Hungarian goods from its zone of occupation in Germany. Davis considered the price 'not too exorbitant'. As a reason for the willingness to trade Vogeler cheaply, he suggested the Hungarians wished to drive a wedge between the Americans and the British. Propaganda claiming the Hungarians had exacted concessions from the Americans would put pressure on the British to come to an agreement on Edgar Sanders. The opening of British markets, thought Davis, was 'far more vital to the Hungarian five-year plan' than the concessions demanded by Berei from the Americans.<sup>95</sup> The further reduction of American staff at the embassy probably helped Vogeler's cause. On 15 May, Davis reported to Berei that the American staff at the embassy would be reduced by 40 per cent, and the Hungarian staff by 47 per cent in total.<sup>96</sup>

During April and May, the two parties ironed out these agreements. Davis continued to claim that the VOA was a mere technical issue for which the Hungarians were to blame. Following the Hungarian complaints, VOA shifted its transmission from 1195 kHz to 1196 kHz, but Radio Petőfi was 'not generally operating on its assigned frequency of 1187' kHz.<sup>97</sup> According to Davis the 'Hungarians deliberately increased the interference'. As soon as the Hungarian language broadcasts of VOA came on 'they would spread their signal' which 'drowned out the Voice of America altogether'. On 15 June Andor Berei told Davis that the Hungarian government accepted the American proposals. Only some minor practical questions needed clearing up: Berei wanted diplomatic passports for the Hungarian officials visiting Germany, and a written statement declaring that US officials would cooperate fully with them. Davis was sure this could be arranged and hoped that Vogeler could be released in time for 4 July, Independence Day. Berei expected he could be released 'within a day or two' after they sorted out the last practicalities.<sup>98</sup> In the following days Davis telegraphed the State Department to smooth these last remaining creases in the agreement. Soon, however, Berei started to backpedal.

<sup>95</sup> 'Budapest to Department of State Legtel 253', 11 April 1950. NARA, Vogeler 6.

<sup>96</sup> 'Budapest to State Department. Legtel 324', 15 May 1950. NARA, Vogeler 6.

<sup>97</sup> The documents use the now redundant name Kilocycles (KC). 'Enclosure No 3 to Budapest. Despatch 549 (Copy)', 26 May 1950. NARA, Vogeler 6.

<sup>98</sup> 'Budapest 950 to Department of State. Memorandum of Conversation at Foreign Office, June 15, 1950.' NARA, Vogeler 7.

Meeting Davis on the nineteenth, he claimed that the VOA was still causing interference.<sup>99</sup>

*The Second Press Leak: The Crown Canard*

One day earlier, on 18 June, the Associated Press correspondent in Vienna called Davis: was it true that an agreement had been reached and Vogeler was to be freed? Other journalists soon followed up the call. Davis asked them to 'publish no hint' of the story, as a leak at this stage could acutely 'embarrass [the] conclusion of negotiations'.<sup>100</sup> This did not work. The *New York Times* reported on 19 June that an agreement had been reached on Vogeler.<sup>101</sup> On 20 June, the Associated Press broke the story that the return of the Holy Crown was part of the settlement.<sup>102</sup> It had come from nowhere: up until then, the Crown had not been mentioned once during the negotiations. According to Davis, '[n]aturally everybody wanted to speculate on what were the terms and somebody read about the Crown of St Stephen and put out this story'.<sup>103</sup> Clearly, the journalist assumed that the Crown belonged to the goods in Germany that were to be restituted to Hungary. The story quickly snowballed, with other media outlets following. *Life* carried a three-page picture report on the Holy Crown.<sup>104</sup>

The news immediately caused uproar in the Hungarian émigré community worldwide. 'The Hungarian American press has been shocked and upset to an extent never before experienced,' wrote John Flournoy Montgomery, former US ambassador to Budapest. 'Telegrams and telephone calls from Europeans and citizens from all parts of the world have already been pouring in to the Hungarian National Council in New York City.'<sup>105</sup> The critics all pointed out the demoralizing results the surrender of the Crown to Rákosi might have, and underlined the special significance of the Crown as an ancient symbol of legitimacy.

In Lisbon, former regent admiral Miklós Horthy called in on the US ambassador. 'Claiming to speak for Hungarians in exile', Horthy stressed the 'supreme symbolic value' of the Crown to all 'national Hungarians whose distress at the loss of the Crown would be immeasurable'. Horthy feared the Soviets would 'destroy or publicly disgrace' the crown as a 'last symbol of pre-Soviet order'.<sup>106</sup> Count György Apponyi, vice president of the Committee of Hungarian Refugees in

<sup>99</sup> 'Budapest 396 to Secretary of State', 19 June 1950. NARA, Vogeler 7.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> 'U.S. Negotiations to Free Vogeler; Officials Reported Hoping for Early Release of American From Hungarian Prison', *New York Times*, 19 June 1950.

<sup>102</sup> 'Vogeler's Ransom set - king's crown'; 'Vogeler's family hopeful of his release', *New York Times*, 19 June 1950.

<sup>103</sup> 'Press and radio news conference', 15 June 1951, Vogeler 10.

<sup>104</sup> 'A Prisoner for a Crown', *Life*, 3 July 1950.

<sup>105</sup> John Flournoy Montgomery, 'Memorandum', 22 June 1950. NARA, Vogeler 7.

<sup>106</sup> 'From Lisbon to Secretary of State', 22 June 1950. NARA, Vogeler 7.

Belgium, wrote to the US embassy there: 'This typical communist blackmail has disgusted all decent Hungarians, whether living at home or in emigration.' Handing this 'symbol of the sovereignty of the Hungarian state and independence of the Hungarian people' to 'the Soviet-Quisling government in Budapest' would shake the faith of Hungarians living in the Western democracy and so 'weaken the inner resistance of the Nation against communist tyranny'.<sup>107</sup> In the US, the Hungarian National Council warned of the 'disastrous consequences which would result from extradition of the Hungarian crown to the communists'. It would 'shock' Hungarian people at home and abroad if this 'last symbol of an enslaved nation's lost sovereignty' was to be 'bartered away'. All Hungarians, 'are united in the desire to prevent this supreme degradation of the nation'.<sup>108</sup>

It was not only Hungarian critics who made these points. Ex-ambassador Flournoy Montgomery cited the 'Doctrine of the Holy Crown of St Stephen' which, he said, meant to Hungarians what 'the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights jointly mean to the Americans'. Flournoy warned the Crown was an 'object of religious worship' which 'should never become a prey of godless Bolshevism, dedicated to the anti-Christ'. Finally, it was a 'historic symbol' and 'an expression of Hungarian self-respect and national unity'. Giving the Crown to the Communist regime would be seen 'as a complete sell-out of the last remnants of Hungarian sovereignty and independence'.<sup>109</sup>

The Austrian ambassador in The Hague warned his American colleague of the 'special mystical significance of the Crown of St Stephen to the Hungarian people' and believed that 'Hungarian communists would now make every effort to obtain physical possession [of the] crown since only by doing so could Communists [*sic*] control [of] Hungary be fully consolidated'. The Vatican underlined the religious connotations of the Crown: 'The Holy See considers the Crown a sacred object worthy of special veneration', and would be 'saddened to see it fall into the power of an authority hostile to the Church'. 'Because of its sacred character the consignment of the Crown into the hands of Communists would be a grave offense to the religious sentiments of the Hungarian people'.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>107</sup> 'Count George Apponyi to US Ambassador, Belgium', 28 June 1950. NARA, Vogeler 7.

<sup>108</sup> 'Executive Committee of the Hungarian National Council to State Department', 1950, undated. NARA, Vogeler 7.

<sup>109</sup> Montgomery, 'Memorandum', 22 June 1950. NARA, Vogeler 7.

<sup>110</sup> 'Archbishop of Laodicea. Apostolic Delegate to Dean Acheson', 28 June 1950. NARA, Vogeler 7.



The State Department was mortified. Officials believed the rumours to be 'prejudicial to the success of our efforts in the Vogeler case', and considered it 'most unfortunate if the question of the Crown were now to be injected in the Vogeler negotiations'. The Department feared, as we shall see with reason, that 'the Hungarians will suddenly demand it as a further condition for Vogeler's release, if only to cause us embarrassment'.<sup>111</sup> In polite letters, the State Department denied the crown had ever been mentioned in negotiations.<sup>112</sup>

### *Collapse of the Deal*

After the first press leak in January and Rákosi's specific request not to talk to the press in March, the second press leak caused Davis extreme embarrassment. The US Embassy in Vienna blamed the British Legation there, which had 'informed British correspondents in confidence', although the British embassy denied the charges.<sup>113</sup> Embassy staff suggested Davis send a letter to the Associated Press about 'such irresponsible reporting'. A clearly inflamed Davis declined, saying 'he would not risk writing a letter unless he could do so on asbestos paper'.<sup>114</sup> Meeting Davis on 20 June, Berei made 'sarcastic remarks' about the 'particularly aggravating' leaks. He said that 'the volume of speculation in press and radio makes prompt settlement [of] this issue more desirable than ever', and commented that he 'would watch with interest just how long until [the] press begins discussing our "radio negotiations"'.<sup>115</sup> Davis responded that the publicity was not intentional and 'extremely painful' to him.<sup>116</sup>

Berei then returned to the content of the discussions. Berei found the shift in frequency of VOA from 1195 kHz to 1196 kHz inadequate. What was important to them was the interference, and said it was 'not correct' that VOA broadcasts 'had moved from the wavelength we took exception to, to one very close to it'. Berei requested the VOA Hungarian broadcasts to be moved to an entirely different frequency, 'which is not close to Radio Petőfi's frequency'.<sup>117</sup>

This was a new request, but Davis was apt to agree. He 'begged' the State Department to accept the Hungarian argument, informing

<sup>111</sup> 'Department of State to Mr Battle', 21 June 1950. NARA, RG 59 General Records of the Department of State; Records of the Executive Secretariat (Dean Acheson); Secretary's Memos 1949-1951 (Nov 1949-Dec 1949).

<sup>112</sup> 'Dean Acheson to Amletti Giovanni Cicognani (Apostolic Delegate)', 7 July 1950. NARA, Vogeler 7.

<sup>113</sup> 'Vienna 862 to Secretary of State', 2 June 1950. NARA, Vogeler 7.

<sup>114</sup> 'Minutes of staff meeting. American Legation, Budapest', 27 June 1950. NARA, Vogeler 7.

<sup>115</sup> 'Budapest 401 to Secretary of State', 20 June 1950. NARA, Vogeler 7.

<sup>116</sup> Andor Berei, 'Feljegyzés', 20 June 1950. MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1965-9d.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

Secretary of State Dean Acheson that Petőfi ‘effectively blankets our 1196 transmission in Hungarian’, which made the VOA ‘completely unintelligible’ in Budapest, though it could possibly be heard in outer provinces.<sup>118</sup> Davis could not ‘help wondering what the United States gains by continuing to use a channel which is effectively blanketed [...] we are not reaching the population in Budapest and its environs under present conditions, and it seems to me that we are standing on our rights to no purpose at the expense of Mr Vogeler’.<sup>119</sup>

In Washington, Dean Acheson clung to the legend that the frequency debate was a mere technical issue, and refused to discuss Voice of America ‘as part of [the] Vogeler negotiations’. Transmitting from Salonika instead of Munich would result in a ‘serious loss of prestige’ and there would be ‘serious political consequences’ if the State Department seemed to ‘give in to Hungarian blackmail’.<sup>120</sup> Finally, Acheson pointed to the disastrous effect of the ballooning Crown story: ‘Ill-informed publicity here, resulting from unfortunate BRIT leak, is already creating complications, which, if allowed to gain momentum over a period of days, may make it extremely difficult for DEPT even to go through with what has already been agreed.’<sup>121</sup> In any case, President Truman agreed with the hard line taken.<sup>122</sup>

### *A Prisoner for a Crown*

The negotiations on Vogeler collapsed because Hungary and the United States could not agree on the frequency issue. The press leak and the Crown story it created buried the talks for the time being. According to comments made by Under State Secretary for Foreign Affairs for Information, Iván Boldizsár, Rákosi personally blocked the agreement between Berei and Davis during the storm of publicity following the press leak in June, saying that ‘of course’ due to the leak ‘for the time being’ nothing could be done. According to Davis, this was ‘entirely consistent with Rákosi’s known aversion to publicity not emanating from or authorized by his office’.<sup>123</sup>

More so than the leak, the breaking out of the Korean War on 25 June paralysed negotiations. Rákosi decided that, due to the war, ‘we will not release him yet’.<sup>124</sup> Still, he was prepared to do so eventually.

<sup>118</sup> ‘Budapest 401 to Secretary of State’, 20 June 1950. NARA, Vogeler 7.

<sup>119</sup> ‘Budapest 635 to Department of State’, 22 June 1950. NARA, Vogeler 7.

<sup>120</sup> ‘State Department to US Embassy Budapest’, 23 June 1950. NARA, Vogeler 7.

<sup>121</sup> ‘State Department 264 to Budapest.’ NARA, Vogeler 7.

<sup>122</sup> ‘State Department to US Embassy Budapest’, 23 June 1950. NARA, Vogeler 7.

<sup>123</sup> ‘Budapest 41. Status of the Vogeler Case’, 19 July 1950. NARA, Vogeler 7.

<sup>124</sup> János M. Rainer, ‘Távirat “Fillipov” elvtársnak. Rákosi Mátyás üzenetei Sztálin titkarságának, 1949–1952’, in *Évkönyv 1998*, ed. János M. Rainer et al., Budapest, 1998, pp. 103–18.

Rákosi wrote to Stalin on 8 July, 'we are for the time being not continuing the negotiations on the extradition of the spy Vogeler', but would hand Vogeler over if the 'Americans are prepared to fulfil our demands'.<sup>125</sup>

The Vogeler case ground to a standstill for almost three months, until Berei and Davis met again on 11 September 1950. The meeting began as a stand-off, with both Berei and Davis clinging to their entrenched positions on the frequency issue, fruitlessly 'going around in circles'.<sup>126</sup> A clearly uncomfortable Berei then brought up the topic of the Crown. In his report, Davis tellingly catches the atmosphere:

Berei then leaned forward, placed his hands on the table, looked at the floor and said in a low tone and hesitating manner quite out of character for him and with many 'ehrs' and 'ohs' that there was one very minor matter on which he felt it would be probably wise for us to understand one another clearly in order to avoid misunderstandings later. The matter was quite clear to him and he thought there was no question about it but perhaps he should mention the matter of the restitution of Hungarian goods. Among the Hungarian goods taken by the Germans had been a small item of Hungarian state property as to which the ownership of which there was no doubt whatever a small matter but of some value to the Hungarian state. He was referring to the 'so-called Hungarian crown' [...] He was sure I would agree with him that the matter was perfectly clear but perhaps it was just as well [...].<sup>127</sup>

Davis, 'considerably ill at ease', 'moodily' responded that, while the Crown undoubtedly was Hungarian state property, he was not sure that the Crown was restitutable.<sup>128</sup> Berei said it was 'perfectly clear in his own mind' that the Crown should be restored. 'The interview ended on this highly disturbing and unsatisfactory note.'<sup>129</sup>

The reason why Berei suddenly introduced the Crown is unclear, but Davis's assessment seems credible. Davis thought the move showed 'the Hungarian government has no intention at this time of releasing Mr. Vogeler'. Upping the ante with the Crown should be seen as a 'second line of defence' in case the Americans suddenly agreed to move the VOA broadcasts to a different frequency. Then the Hungarians would have no option but to trade Vogeler. The Hungarians were 'very well aware' that the United States government 'cannot submit to black-mail in the matter of the Hungarian Crown'.<sup>130</sup> Davis speculated that the idea for using the Crown had been 'implanted by irresponsible

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> N. Davis, 'Memorandum of Conversation', 11 September 1950. NARA, Vogeler 7.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> 'Feljegyzés', 11 September 1950. MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1962-9d, 001348/1950.

<sup>129</sup> 'Budapest to Department of State, Legtel 106', 11 September 1950. NARA, Vogeler 7.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

press dispatches', which themselves could have been 'inspired by Hungarian agents'.<sup>131</sup>

Negotiations now froze totally until December, when the Hungarians seemingly started to climb down. In a draft note, the Hungarian government once again cited the changing of radio frequencies as a condition to Vogeler's release, and demanded that the US 'count among the restitutable goods the artefacts of historical value, specifically the crown of Saint Stephen'.<sup>132</sup> It is remarkable that the Communist author of this draft memorandum referred to *saint* Stephen rather than the usual *king* Stephen (or the *Hungarian crown*).<sup>133</sup> However, in a later version of this draft, no mention of the Crown appeared at all, merely the phrase 'Hungarian historical valuables'.<sup>134</sup> In a meeting on 16 December with Davis, Berei no longer explicitly demanded the return of the Crown. Instead he said, 'we have always emphasized, that we want it to be clear what the American government considers to be restitutable goods'.<sup>135</sup> This demand for clarification of the American position was clearly weaker than a blanket demand for return of the Crown, and seemingly a signal that negotiations could be reopened.

Nevertheless, in late March 1951 Hungarian ambassador to Washington Imre Horváth thought the return of the Crown was still on the agenda. He even believed the Americans would soon be willing to hand it over. He based this impression on a series of articles on Vogeler in the American press: five articles in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The aim of the articles, according to Horváth, was to prepare public opinion for the fact that the United States government 'in exchange for Vogeler's release will fulfil every demand of the Hungarian government'. Horváth thought it plausible that, following the end of the media campaign 'the American government will once again take up the question of Vogeler's release', and would be prepared to 'return the Hungarian Crown besides fulfilling the other demands of the Hungarian government as a quid pro quo in return for Vogeler's extradition'.<sup>136</sup>

### *Vogeler's Release*

Typically, Horváth misjudged the function of the American press. The stories, which accused the State Department of inaction, had not been

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Berei sent this draft to Rákosi on 13 December. His response is unknown. 'Emlékeztető', 12 December 1950. MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1965-9d, 14496/1949.

<sup>133</sup> 'Jegyzék-tervezet', 1949. MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1960-9d, 14075/1949.

<sup>134</sup> MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1965-9d, 002048/1950.

<sup>135</sup> Berei Andor, 'Feljegyzés', 16 December 1950. MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1965-9d, 00218/1950.

<sup>136</sup> 'Tárgy: Vogeler ügy', 24 March 1951. MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1965-9d, 00378/1950.

planted in the press by the US government, but had been inspired by Lucille Vogeler's campaign to secure her husband's release.<sup>137</sup> Though Horváth was wrong about American willingness to surrender the Crown, he was right that something was about to happen. According to Davis, the State Department had, in the meantime, investigated the blanketing of VOA's broadcasting by Radio Petőfi, and had become convinced by Davis's argument of the futility of continuing VOA transmissions from Munich.<sup>138</sup> The State Department, according to Davis, then 'dumped the decision in my lap'. Davis had two options: 'Shall we go to the Hungarians and say okay, let Vogeler out and we will shift you to this wavelength, or should we shift in our own interests and then go and tell them and say, so what are you waiting for.' The second option was risky: the Hungarians might tell themselves 'we have got what we want on this, why turn over the body'. On the other hand, simply proposing a deal also had its risks. 'After a year and a half of dealing with those birds', Davis feared the Hungarians would then set new demands.<sup>139</sup> Davis rejected this option. On 7 April, without any prior warning to Budapest, VOA shifted its transmissions from Munich to Salonika.<sup>140</sup>

On 9 April, Davis met Berei at the foreign ministry where he announced the change in frequency.<sup>141</sup> To indicate his willingness to wrap up the case, Davis also introduced a threat: if no agreement was to be reached by 30 April, the US would 'proceed with liquidation by public sale' of any Hungarian property in its zone of occupation.<sup>142</sup> He also made it clear that the Holy Crown could not be part of the negotiations.<sup>143</sup> In line with the watered down Hungarian demands regarding the Crown, Davis did present, for the first time since September 1950, the official American position on the Crown. It had not come into American hands as war booty, but had been 'surrendered to United States authorities for safekeeping and is being held in trust'. Berei disagreed with the argument but promised to take up the matter with the government.<sup>144</sup>

<sup>137</sup> Carruthers, *Cold War Captives*, p. 156.

<sup>138</sup> 'Press and radio news conference', 15 June 1951. NARA, Vogeler 10.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> 'Emlékeztető', 20 April 1951. MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1965-9d, 00523/1951.

<sup>141</sup> 'Aide Memoire (concerning Crown).' MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1965-9d, 00571/1951.

<sup>142</sup> 'Department of State to US Legation, NIACT 300', 27 April 1951. NARA, Vogeler 7. See also the brief memorandum announcing the end of transmissions: 'Aide Memoire.' MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1965-9d, 00571/1951.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> 'Tárgy: Amerikai követ látogatása /Vogeler-ügy/. ' MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1965-9d, 00571/1951.

Berei responded on 20 April 1951, telling Davis that the Hungarian government now agreed to the release of Vogeler.<sup>145</sup> At the same time, he presented the Hungarian position on the Crown in a detailed memorandum. As in December, the author of a draft version abandoned Communist convention, and repeatedly called it the 'Holy Crown'.<sup>146</sup> Even the final version of the memorandum described it as the 'Crown of St Stephen'.<sup>147</sup> As far as the Hungarians were concerned, the American argument was 'in flagrant contradiction of the general rules of International Law'. In particular they disagreed with the claim that the Crown 'was surrendered to United States authorities for safekeeping and is being held in trust by them'. They contested that the Crown had been handed over by 'officers of the fascist Szálasi government subservient to Hitlerite Germany'. These were not the 'legal proprietors of the Crown' and had 'no right to surrender it'.<sup>148</sup> Both parties used these legal fictions until 1978 in the propaganda war concerning the Crown.

On 21 April, the Hungarian foreign ministry announced Vogeler's impending release to the press.<sup>149</sup> The Hungarians finally released Vogeler on 28 April. He was driven to the frontier in Vienna by car and there handed over to the American consul. The Hungarian émigré press was delighted that the Crown was not involved in his release. *Amerikai Magyarország* wrote that 'every Hungarian person, whether in the ancient fatherland or abroad, can only with satisfaction and happiness think that the Holy Crown is in secure hands, and only then will return to Hungary, when in a free country a free Hungarian people can guard it'.<sup>150</sup> The Hungarian authorities followed the response in American émigré circles with great interest: diplomats informed Berei that 'the question of the Crown caused excitement especially in Hungarian fascist circles', who 'greatly praised the American government for refusing to negotiate on its return'.<sup>151</sup>

The Hungarians released Vogeler for the price agreed prior to the unfortunate leak of June 1950. It was, apparently, a bargain for the Americans. Allowing the reopening of the consulates and rescinding the travel ban to Hungary could hardly be termed concessions, as these had been American punitive measures following Vogeler's arrest. Voice of America could be heard more audibly in Budapest after the

<sup>145</sup> 'Emlékeztető.' MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1962-9d, 00523/1951.

<sup>146</sup> 'Aide Memoire', 1951/04/18. MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1965-9d, 00523/1951.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> 'Aide memoire (English translation).' MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1965-9d, 00253/1951.

<sup>149</sup> 'Vogeler Case. Europe', 24 April 1951. NARA, Vogeler 9.

<sup>150</sup> 'Hogy próbálták kiszorolni a magyar Szent Koronát a magyar kommunisták?', *Amerikai Magyarország*, 28 April 1951. 'Vogeler kiszabadult, de nem a Szent Korona ellenében', April 1950. MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1965-9d, 0755/1951.

<sup>151</sup> 'Vogeler megérkezésének visszahangja.' MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1945-1965-9d, 07555/51.

move to Salonika. In any case, from October 1951 Radio Free Europe, a far more aggressively anti-Communist station than VOA, began broadcasting from Munich.<sup>152</sup>

What, then, did Rákosi gain? He did not use the release of Vogeler for reasons of domestic propaganda: the party organ *Szabad Nép* only mentioned Vogeler's release very briefly, in four short lines. It did not mention the Crown at all.<sup>153</sup> The discussions over restitutions collapsed soon after Vogeler's release, practically annulling that part of the deal, though this was perhaps not immediately clear at the time. Rákosi later said his Politburo colleagues expected a great deal from the restitution of goods.<sup>154</sup> More general economic problems may have been playing in the background. According to one report to Rákosi, lack of trade with the West following the arrest of Vogeler and Sanders was making it impossible to fulfil the Five Year Plan. To aid industrial construction, Hungary was now forced to ask the Soviet Union for help.<sup>155</sup> From this perspective, Rákosi had got rid of Vogeler, who had served his purpose in the Standard trial, without loss of face.

### *The Legacy of the Vogeler Case*

Hungarian exiles in the 1950s protested against the return of the Crown to Rákosi because of its national, religious and constitutional associations, the same reasons why Szálasi had taken it out of the country. These were of little significance to the regime. Hungarian Communist officials occasionally still spoke of the 'Holy Crown' rather than the 'Hungarian Crown', while the Stalinist leadership did not demand the return of the Crown for reasons of political legitimacy. The Crown was introduced into the negotiations more or less by coincidence, following a press leak and the speculation of an Associated Press journalist. The Crown then turned out to be a valuable means for Rákosi and Berei to stall the discussions on Vogeler, and was useful as a propaganda weapon. Davis succinctly summarized the meaning of the Crown to Rákosi as follows:

There is irony in the situation, the Crown being of little intrinsic value itself and as the symbol of monarchical sovereignty not an object to which the democratic United States or Communist Hungary can attach any great sentimental or symbolic value. Regaining possession of the Crown would be a very considerable internal triumph for the regime. Our retention of it gives the regime a useful propaganda weapon. Either way, we seem to be the losers.<sup>156</sup>

<sup>152</sup> I thank Professor István Deák for this observation.

<sup>153</sup> 'Magyar Amerikai Tárgyalások', *Szabad Nép. A Magyar Dolgozók Pártjának központi lapja*, 22 April 1951.

<sup>154</sup> Rákosi and Lázár, *Visszaemlékezések 1940–1956*, vol. 2, p. 664.

<sup>155</sup> 'Untitled', 1951. MOL 276.65/254, 131.

<sup>156</sup> 'Budapest to Department of State, Legtel 106.' NARA, Vogeler 7.



The propaganda value of demanding the return did not lie so much in its effect on the Hungarian domestic audience, but more in its effect abroad, where the mention of the return of the Crown sent émigrés into paroxysms of indignant frenzy.

The Vogeler case did also have an enduring legacy. The issue of the Crown had been until Vogeler a political dispute simmering under the surface. As soon as it was connected to the *cause célèbre* of Robert Vogeler, the Crown issue was propelled into public view, which ensured an impasse. It was now impossible to discreetly return the Crown as part of any agreement on the return of Hungarian property. Though Robert Vogeler was long forgotten by the time the Crown returned to Hungary, the legal fictions that both sides created during the Vogeler case to advance their positions would resurface again in the 1970s, with the Americans rather shakily claiming that the Crown was not looted but had been given into custody, and with Hungarian propagandists gleefully pointing out that it was not a legal government, but fascists and war criminals who had handed it over.

### 3. Conclusion: Kádár and the Crown

During the Kádár years the attitude of Hungarian émigrés changed. The political right unabashedly vilified President Carter, all the more outraged because the decision to return the Crown was announced on 4 November 1977, the anniversary of the Soviet military intervention of 1956. Other prominent Hungarians, however, such as former prime minister Ferenc Nagy and Columbia University academic István Deák, now supported its return, mostly because they hoped the Crown's return would boost national sentiment.<sup>157</sup> While Rákosi never seriously expected its return, from around 1965 the Kádár regime made the demand for the Crown a keystone of Hungarian-American relations, and constantly put its return on the agenda.<sup>158</sup>

In contrast to Rákosi, Kádár's propagandists did not treat the Crown as a mere museum piece, but imbued it with new meaning.<sup>159</sup> One of the chief propaganda goals of the regime was the 'dissolution of the false values and myths — or their remnants — connected to the Crown'. By this was meant Holy Crown Doctrine 'and its more vulgar variations'.

<sup>157</sup> 'The Holy Crown of St. Stephen and United States-Hungarian relations: hearing before the Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East of the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, Ninety-fifth Congress, first session, November 9, 1977.'

<sup>158</sup> 'Feljegyzés. Tárgy: előterjesztés-tervezet.' 15 September 1965. MOL XIX-J-1-J-USA-1965-13d.

<sup>159</sup> László Kulcsár and Guy Lázár 'Ki mit tart es tud a koronáról', *Radio és Televízió Szemle*, 10, 1979, 1, pp. 84–98.

Kádár's propagandists feared that treating the crown, as Rákosi had done, as a measly antiquity would not dispel these myths but 'unwittingly would have decreased the political value of the return of the crown'. The solution was to 'revitalize' the Crown and only adopt those meanings 'which after the passing of a millennium are acceptable to our political goals', namely values expressing 'the establishment of a societal-political system serving the interests of the entire Hungarian people', and 'the defence of the sovereignty and independence of the Hungarian State'.<sup>160</sup>

At first sight, the return of the Crown presented a major propaganda success for the regime. The Crown returned on 6 January 1978, as irony would have it, the birthday of the man responsible for its removal from Hungary in the first place, Arrow Cross leader Ferenc Szálasi, as his widow Gizella Lutz noted with delight.<sup>161</sup> The handing-over ceremony was the television event of the decade. According to the Patriotic People's Front (Hazafias Népfront), 'everyone, who was able to, watched the television broadcast, as a result of which the streets became deserted'.<sup>162</sup> In January 1978 alone 400 articles on the Crown appeared in the printed press, so that 'people in roughly a week could find more information about the Crown than in the preceding 30 years'.<sup>163</sup> The elderly, in particular, found the return of the Crown 'moving', and the religious saw it as 'a great joy'. Young people, by contrast, regarded the spectacle with 'indifference'.<sup>164</sup> According to a secret police informer, 'students do not talk about it at all'.<sup>165</sup>

While right-wing émigrés in the United States were furious, right-wing opponents of the regime in Hungary reacted mildly. Secret police informers reported on former Arrow Cross members queuing up at the national museum for a glimpse of the Crown, and though one of them hoped 'the Russians will not put their hand on the crown', there was no sign of the hysterical opposition to its return that was witnessed in the United States.<sup>166</sup> There were also some rare embarrassing moments for the authorities in the museum: 'In the first place older people — mainly women — crossed themselves, some of them even kneeled'.<sup>167</sup>

By mechanically using the phrase 'Hungarian Crown', the Hungarian press did its best to extirpate old associations with St Stephen. At the

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> ÁBTL, 3.1.5.0 20016, 'Kincseskamra', pp. 51–53.

<sup>162</sup> MOL 288.22/1978/10, 3–5.

<sup>163</sup> Kulcsár and Lázár, 'Ki mit tart es tud a koronarol', pp. 84–98.

<sup>164</sup> MOL 288.22/1978/10, 3–5.

<sup>165</sup> ÁBTL, 3.1.2. M-37888, 'Régész', p. 57.

<sup>166</sup> 'A koronazási jelvények kiállításának látogatóságáról', ÁBTL, 3.1.5.0 20016, 'Kincseskamra', pp. 51–53.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

handover of the Crown, the Americans demanded that the terms 'St Stephen' and 'Holy Crown' be used in the official communiqué. The Hungarians haggled them down to one reference only.<sup>168</sup> They perhaps need not have worried. While in the 1950s Communist bureaucrats still sanctified the Crown with slips of the pen, in 1978, in a statement that confirmed the worst fears of nationalist émigrés, one Catholic priest told Hungarian foreign ministry officials that the return of the Crown demonstrated 'the fact, that the Hungarian People's Republic is the heir of historical Hungary'.<sup>169</sup>

This wrangling seemed to have little effect on the population. The Party's Agitprop Department commissioned a public opinion poll by the Mass Communication Research Centre (Tömegkommunikációs Kutatóközpont, TKK). According to the poll, 99 per cent of the sample group had heard of the return of the Crown, and 85 per cent had seen the TV broadcast. The return of the Crown had indeed, as Deák and Nagy hoped, rekindled interest in national traditions. Shown pictures of several crowns, 89 per cent of the respondents could identify the real one. The pollsters attributed this high score to the publicity surrounding the return of the Crown, as prior to that 'people could see it relatively seldom'.<sup>170</sup> Fewer people recognized the coat of arms of the Hungarian People's Republic — even only 82 per cent of Communist Party members identified the correct coat of arms.

Only 22 per cent viewed the return as a form of recognition for the Kádár government, as an award for 'present economic and political achievements'. Instead, 54 per cent thought the Americans had given it back 'because it is ours', because it was a Hungarian national symbol. The debate on the legitimacy of the Crown's capture, such a key feature of the international war of words since the Vogeler case, had barely registered: 34 per cent knew American soldiers had taken it, only 18 per cent mentioned the involvement of the Arrow Cross.

The Crown did not obviously prop up the national legitimacy of the regime. Eighty per cent of the sample group associated the Crown with notions of 'a thousand-year Hungary', that is, exactly the 'vulgar' expression of Holy Crown Doctrine the Party hoped to extirpate. Regime propaganda seemed to resonate: a slightly smaller number, 74 per cent, agreed with the statement that the Crown represented Hungarian independence. Yet this can also be seen as a non-controversial response to a leading question rather than the effect of propaganda. When asked

<sup>168</sup> 'Feljegyzés Győri Imre és Puja Frigyes elvtársnak', XIX-J-1-J-USA-1978-22d, 00255/12.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> Kulcsár and Lázár, 'Ki mit tart es tud a koronarol', pp. 84–98.

to state what the Crown's 'official' name was, the overwhelming majority of those who could give an answer used religious phrases such as 'St Stephen's Crown' (50 per cent) and 'Holy Crown' (26 per cent). Despite the decades of robotic repetition by the state press, only a minority used secular monikers such as 'Hungarian Crown' (21 per cent) and the 'Crown of King Stephen I' (11 per cent). While this again suggests the Crown rekindled nationalism, it does not mean that Hungarians were Crown enthusiasts or shared the frantic obsession with Crown Doctrine of Szálasi, Horthy, Mindszenty and right-wing exiles: 52 per cent could not remember any 'official' name at all.<sup>171</sup>

The Hungarian public, then, enjoyed the spectacle of its return but seemed unmoved by the diplomatic exchanges between the Hungarian and US governments, the feuding between Hungarian exiles, and simply ignored the intricacies of either Holy Crown Doctrine or the Communist propaganda machine.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.